

The Rathjen-Hickey Plan

For its meeting of 30 May 2022, the Hobart City Council released a large package of papers (the Package) detailing its relationship with UTAS:

hobart.infocouncil.biz/Open/2022/05/CO_30052022_ATT_1642_SUP_EXCLUDED.PDF

I have worked through these papers and compared them to the redacted extract of UTAS Council Minutes, which UTAS provided to me under the RTI Act, and which it also published at:

https://www.utas.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1591161/University-of-Tasmania-Council-minutes-extract-Hobart-City-Move.pdf

It is an interesting question as to when wholesale, as distinct from piecemeal, relocation of UTAS into the Hobart CBD really crystallised as a UTAS/HCC objective.

The Memorandum of Understanding for 2015-2018 between UTAS and the HCC seems to have largely envisaged the continuation of piecemeal moves (Package, pages 247-57).

Putting aside developments on the STEM building, by late 2016/early 2017, it was however the clear intent of Vice-Chancellor Rathjen and Lord Mayor Hickey to substantially relocate the southern campus of UTAS to the Hobart CBD.

In late 2016, Vice-Chancellor Rathjen invited the HCC to participate in the UniverCities conference and to visit the university cities of Freiburg and Cambridge.

In an agenda paper prepared for the HCC's Special Governance Committee Meeting of 24 October 2016 (the Package, pages 421-32), Tim Short (an HCC executive) recommended that the HCC join UTAS in the trip, and made the following statements:

"2.2 On balance, this report suggests the invitation is worthy of consideration given that UTAS has a clear desire to move into the inner city."

"4.4 The conference was suggested by the Vice Chancellor because of UTAS' clear intent to move more of its campus into the inner city."

"4.5 The Vice Chancellor is clearly wishing to engage the Council in a discussion about what it means to have UTAS based in the inner city and how Hobart can best position itself to take full advantage of being a University City."

"4.14 It is clear that UTAS is on a definite pathway to relocate into the inner-city."

The joint UTAS/HCC trip went ahead and there is extensive treatment of the trip in the Package. Following the trip, Lord Mayor Hickey wrote the attached letter to Vice-Chancellor Rathjen (also in the Package, pages 468-69). This sentence is particularly telling:

"Firstly, I wanted to assure you that the Council is completely committed to and shares UTAS's aspirations to move into the inner city."

A major question in all this is to what extent Vice-Chancellor Rathjen was operating under authority from the UTAS Council.

Judging from the redacted extract of the UTAS Council Minutes published by UTAS, it appears that the UTAS Council did not begin serious consideration of relocation until August 2017. In this case what Tim Short was writing about wasn't really UTAS' position, it was Vice-Chancellor's Rathjen's position.

With Vice-Chancellor Rathjen having such a clear agenda by late 2016, the extent to which he shaped the UTAS Council's thinking on relocation is an open, and very interesting, question.

There is also an issue of whether the State Government was kept informed of what is called here the Rathjen-Hickey plan, as it evolved. There are clear gaps in the DPAC, State Growth and Education documents that have been provided up to 13 September 2022, but it seems unlikely that Lord Mayor Hickey would have been kept better informed the Premier Hodgman of Vice-Chancellor Rathjen's ambitions, particularly given the latter's willingness to go public by mid-2017.